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ABSTRACT

The public, the media, and the candidates each bring a unique and sometimes contradictory set of needs to the political campaign debate that must be reconciled in designing formats to significantly improve debate practice. Five format suggestions address problems characteristic of debates, particularly at the state and local levels: (1) format designers should implement techniques that feature direct clash; (2) designers should seek formats that develop more systematically the issue and policy differences between candidates; (3) designers and questioners should develop more rigorous methods for selecting questions; (4) designers and questioners should provide follow up periods for candidates to push each other to address the questions; (5) debate reporters should strive to provide balanced coverage and avoid instantaneous analysis; and (6) candidates should be given equal time to answer questions and confront one another. (HTH)

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POLITICAL CAMPAIGN DEBATES:**RECONCILING PUBLIC, MEDIA, AND CANDIDATE NEEDS****Jack Kay****University of Nebraska-Lincoln**

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During the past decade the phenomenon of the political campaign debate has become a more frequent occurrence in the campaign process. Political candidates at all levels, truly ranging from dog-catcher to president, are appearing before the public and squaring off with their challengers. The previous advice given in campaign handbooks to "think of reasons not to have a debate" is being replaced with advice offering strategies and tactics for successful debating.¹ The current scene is aptly described by Jeff Greenfield in Playing to Win: An Insider's Guide to Politics: "In today's political climate you must be prepared to debate. You must be prepared to spend many nights in hotel ballrooms, school auditoria, and other centers of public life, exchanging thrusts and parries with those who want the job you want. You must be prepared to spend Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings in television studios, arguing with your

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rivals in front of a panel of newspaper and broadcast reporters. You must be prepared to risk months of planning, and millions of dollars, on a careless slip of the tongue or an accidental camera angle showing you adjusting your trousers in a manner which suggests you have become unduly excited by the heat of the campaign."²

Accompanying the increasing occurrence of the political campaign debate is what seems to be a vigorous research effort by speech communication scholars to better understand the phenomenon. Study after study has appeared exploring the various presidential campaign debates. More recently studies have appeared examining debates at state and local levels. Although the studies have certainly not produced a definitive view of the function and effects of political debates, they have reached the point where some researchers are confident enough to suggest changes in format and strategy.³

This report argues for several changes in the format of political campaign debates. The suggestions stem from my personal involvement in designing debate formats used in several Nebraska Congressional and Unicameral campaigns and from a review of existing literature on campaign debates.⁴

Although much attention has been focused by researchers and the media on the format of political campaign debates, the vast majority of studies and reports take a rather singular perspective. We are exposed to studies and reports which examine

campaign debates from the perspective of the public. Such studies normally focus on what effect the debate and its format has on the electorate. A number of other reports focus on the role of the media and reporters in campaign debates. Still other reports examine the needs of the candidates in establishing equitable formats.⁵ The public, the media, and the candidates each bring a unique and, at times, contradictory, set of needs to the campaign debate that must be addressed in designing formats. These three perspectives, the public, the media, and the candidates, must be reconciled in order to significantly improve the practice of political debates.

The Public Perspective

Normative political theory suggests that campaign debates perform a vital democratic function: debates offer the public a glimpse of the candidates confronting one another on the vital issues of the election, thus providing voters with the specific information needed to make a rational electoral choice. The Washington Star revealed this philosophy in commentary following the 1948 Dewey-Stassen radio debate: "They (debates) are educational in character, they put the speakers on their mettle, they reveal weaknesses which are obscured in ordinary speech-making. If there were more of them, we would have better campaigns, candidates better prepared to discuss the real issues of the day and an electorate composed of the American radio public, better able to judge both issues and candidates."⁶

Contrasting normative political theory is the view established by some empirical research suggesting that for a large segment of the voting public, campaign debates produce a "yawn" effect--the public sits backs and "yawns" at what they perceive to be the routine political "shananigans" of candidates who are far removed from the public. A much smaller segment of the public sits back and hopes for, and occasionally gets, a good fight.⁷

Research establishing precisely what the public expects to receive from political debates is certainly needed. The days when debates simply fulfilled a predisposition reinforcement function are gone. Considerable research has demonstrated more direct voting direction effects resulting from (and correleating with) campaign debates. Responses to a 1980 presidential campaign survey suggest that many voters look to political debates to provide the candidates with a "test under fire." Overwhelmingly, the survey respondents reported that they found the semi-direct confrontation format in the 1980 presidential debate a highly desirable feature. Key dissatisfactions with the format centered upon the questions asked by the media representatives and the lack of direct candidate-to-candidate clash. Several respondents suggested doing away with the reporters and "letting the candidates go at it head-to-head."⁸ Thus, the perspective of the public may in fact be one in which there is a "yawn" factor which might be overcome by changes in debate formats that either involve more direct clash between candidates or develop questions for the candidates which more

closely parallel the public's agenda of important issues.

The Media Perspective

The media obviously feels it should play a major role in campaign debates. Because they regard campaign debates as important news events, the media is justifiably concerned that political debates not merely become campaign commercials in which contrived messages are presented. In order to fulfill their "watchdog" role the media has become increasingly active in sponsoring political debates. As most reviews of campaign debates at various levels establish, "debates" often become in actuality "press conferences," with newspaper reporters and/or television correspondents asking all the questions. How closely the reporters' questions match the public agenda of campaign issues has been called into question by several researchers.⁹

The role of the media in creating issues following the debate has also been the subject of intense controversy. Given the "yawn" factor in public reaction to campaign debates, several individuals feel that the media will "harp" upon misstatements by the candidates. Debate watching by the media may become the search for the serious "gaffe." The media will certainly continue to play an important role in designing, sponsoring, and reporting campaign debates. However, there does seem to be reason for serious introspection by the media both in terms of the questions asked by their panelists and the manner in which they report on the debates to the public.

The Candidate Perspective

Academic research seems to be relatively unconcerned with the perspective that the candidate and their staff brings to bear on the debate format. Debate advisor and Professor of Speech Communication Myles Martel articulately argues that the fundamental perspective the candidate brings to the debate format is a concern for equity and fairness. Martel writes: "It would be no exaggeration to compare the 1980 presidential debate preparation process with an advanced game of chess. Nearly every move regarding the decisions to debate, formats, strategies and tactics, and the execution of the debates themselves, was fraught with political implications. One mismove--one untoward statement or look--and the election could have been lost. As a fervent advocate of political debates, I left this experience more convinced than ever that the candidates should retain control of the process, particularly the decision to debate, scheduling and format design. To make presidential debates mandatory and to make a neutral third party mainly responsible for their preparation raises too great a risk that, intentionally or not, one candidate could become favored over the other."¹⁰

During the last several years a number of studies have examined the arguments and evidence used in debates. Unfortunately, much of this research examines the evidence and arguments with a priori models of argument. Such research could benefit by seeking to discover the standards for argument and

evidence imposed by the public and the media. Perhaps the richest advice for candidates in terms of argumentation strategy comes from past participants and advisors. For example, political consultant Jeff Greenfield discusses the following themes in providing advice to the debaters: "Keep your opponent off balance," and "if you want to attack your rival's position, wait for the chance to counterpunch." Greenfield elaborates: "The easiest way to win a debate is to appear better-informed, more comfortable, more at ease, than your opponent. This is part of the general principle that the press, which will interpret the debate, is much more comfortable judging appearances than substance. Reporters can see fingers drumming a table, an Adam's apple bobbing up and down, with much more certainty than they can calculate the cost of a tax abatement scheme."¹¹

Review of Format Problems

Based upon a review of campaign debates, focusing upon debates at all levels but with particular attention paid to debates at the local and state level, four format problems appear to deserve more attention.¹²

First, the formats of most debates fail to maximize clash between candidates. Candidates are rarely given the direct opportunity to confront one another during the debates. In many instances the debate format designers seem wed to the parliamentary practice of having opponents address each other through the moderator.

Second, and especially true at the local and state level, is the general poor quality of questions. Three types of questions dominated the reporters' agendas. The most frequent were global questions which sought opinions regarding the candidates' identification of major problems facing the city, state, or nation (e.g., What do you see as the most important issue facing the nation today?). Such questions neither promoted controversy or highlighted policy differences between candidates. A second genre of questions were the "try and trap the candidate" variety (e.g., Isn't it true that you once supported H.R. 7? Why are you flip-flopping now?). The third variety of questions tended to highlight personality issues in the campaign (e.g., Your opponent has accused you of taking the low road in this campaign. How do you respond?). Each genre of questions really fails to highlight fundamental issue clash between candidates and their policies. The conclusion is left that the relationship between the agenda established by the reporters bears little resemblance to the agenda of the electorate or the candidates.

The third problem observed in debate formats involves the lack of issue development. Collectively, the questions asked of candidates did very little to comprehensively address any one or several key campaign issues. Instead, the questions usually represented a mere hodge-podge of loosely connected ideas. Given the time limitations and the lack of focus in debates on specific areas of interest it seems obvious that most of the debates could not provide careful policy comparison.

Fourth, there is a general avoidance on the part of the candidates to directly answer the questions posed by panelists. Oftentimes when "difficult" questions were asked, especially in debate formats where no follow-up by reporters or candidates was allowed, candidates neatly sidestepped the questions.

Suggestions for Format Changes

1. Designers of debate formats should implement techniques which feature direct clash.
2. Designers of debate formats should seek formats which more systematically develop issue and policy differences between candidates.
3. Designers of debate formats and questioners should develop more rigorous methods for selecting questions.
4. Designers of debate formats should provide follow-up periods for candidates to directly push each other to address the questions.
5. Reporters of political campaign debates should seek to provide balanced coverage of such debates and should avoid instantaneous analysis following debates.
6. Candidates should be given equal time to answer questions and

to confront one another.

Application of the Suggestions

The suggestions identified in this report were to some degree implemented in a series of radio debates I designed for several campaigns during the 1980 election period.¹³ The debate formats introduced direct clash at several points during the debates. One part of the debate allowed the candidates to directly cross-examine each other on the subject matter of their choice. Similarly, candidates were given a two minute period in which to comment upon the answer given by their opponent. The debate design also provided for a much more rigorous question selection process than is common in most political debates. Rather than rely upon reporter questions or candidate-submitted questions, we undertook a question selection process which attempted to emphasize issue differences between the candidates. Several steps were undertaken to accomplish this, including a questionnaire filled out by the candidates regarding the issue and policy differences they perceived in the campaign, a content analysis of newspaper stories on the campaign, and a survey of voters to determine what information they felt they were lacking on the campaign. Based upon the data collected, questions were constructed and then reviewed by reporters and news directors for the purpose of assessing clarity. The topic areas from which the questions were drawn, limited to the five major issues produced by the survey, were then given to the candidates one week in advance of the debate. Comments from the candidates and the

radio audience suggest that the format and question selection process was favorably received.

NOTES

¹Contrast, for example, Arnold Steinberg, The Political Campaign Handbook (Lexington, MS: Lexington Books, 1976), pp. 126-27; with Jeff Greenfield, Playing to Win: An Insider's Guide to Politics (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), pp. 196-217.

²Greenfield, p. 198.

³See for example, Susan Hellweg and Steven Phillips, "Form and Substance: A Comparative Analysis of Five Formats Used in the 1980 Presidential Debates," Speaker and Gavel 18 (Winter 1981): 67-76.

⁴See Jack Kay, "Campaign Debate Formats: The Non-Presidential Level," unpublished paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Anaheim, Ca., 15 Nov. 1981.

⁵For an excellent review of studies see Susan Hellweg, "Political Debate Formats: A State of the Art Review," unpublished paper presented to the Speech Communication Association Convention, Louisville, Ky., Nov. 1982.

⁶The Evening Star (Washington, D.C.), 18 May 1948, p. 8.

⁷Results of a survey research project conducted in Lincoln,

Ne., by Jack Kay.

⁸Ibid.

⁹See Kay, "Campaign Debate Formats"; also, Diana Prentice, Janet Larsen, and Matthew Sobnosky, "The Carter-Reagan Debate: A Comparison of Clash in the Dual Format Debate," unpublished paper presented to the Speech Communication Association Convention, Anaheim, Ca., November 1981.

¹⁰Myles Martel, "Debate Preparation in the Reagan Camp: An Insider's View," Speaker and Gavel 18 (Winter 1981): 34-46.

¹¹Greenfield, pp. 211-12.

¹²See Kay, "Campaign Debate Formats."

¹³Ibid.